

## Snowflakes and Memories

It was Christmas Eve and London was full of the spirit of Christmas. A fine coating of snow had swirled in from somewhere up north and coated all the lamp posts, trees, and sidewalks with a lacy white lattice of dazzling silvery white. The tinkling of bells could be heard through the air and the echo of children's laughter drifted upwards as the excited kids ran in the snow, throwing snowballs, making snow angels, and whispering to each other about their hopes for Christmas morning. Carolers were going street to street singing a capella and wishing all who heard them a very merry and happy Christmas.

Severus Snape had just recently accepted the position of Potions Master at Hogwarts School and he was currently enjoying a cup of eggnog laced with a bit of brandy in front of his fire. He was wearing a soft black velvet robe with green trim and a pair of black trousers and a white cable knit sweater. He could hear the voices of the carolers down the street and the soft crunch of small booted feet sliding and scrambling on the snow. His little house on Spinners End was blanketed by snow, and the only sign that anyone lived there were the soft glow of lights in the window and a small evergreen wreath upon the door.

Inside, Severus had a small tree, tastefully decorated with green and silver beads, and ornaments that his mother had saved over the years from Sev's childhood. He had found the box up in the garret and spent an hour putting them on the little evergreen, smiling a little as he recalled Christmases past. He had not had the best childhood, Lord knew, but Eileen had always done her best to make Christmas special for her son, even if they barely had money to spend on gifts. They had always received a Christmas food basket from the church, so at least they had a decent Christmas dinner. Of course Severus hadn't known that their dinner had come from charity until he was older, when he was a child he had assumed that his mother had made it.

Now it was just himself, for his mother had passed away when he was still at Hogwarts and his father was gone as well, not that he missed the miserable bastard too much. Tobias had made the holiday season memorable by getting drunk and being nastier than his wont,

and his son used to pray he'd get good and sozzled by dinnertime, so he'd pass out and leave them in peace. Tobias had usually obliged.

Severus stretched out his long legs to the softly blazing fire, lifting his head and gazing out the window that faced the street. Snowflakes were slowly drifting through the air and he watched them idly, recalling a time long ago, when he and Lily had been eight and they had raced outside to celebrate the first snowfall of the season.

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"Sev! Look at all the snowflakes!" Lily cried, spinning around and sticking out her tongue to catch them. Her gold-red hair shone in the winter white landscape like a fiery beacon. Snow was falling on her hair and her quilted red coat. Her green eyes sparkled in mischievous delight.

Severus watched her, clapping his hands and smiling quietly at his best friend, who loved the snow and could never resist racing out in it. He was wearing an old coat of his father's, cut down to fit him and a pair of soft blue mittens, which were a gift from Lily's mum, Daisy.

"C'mon, Sev! Try and taste the snowflakes!" Lily called.

Severus shrugged and stuck out his tongue, and immediately felt the cold tingle of a snowflake upon it. "Mmm. Tastes like . . .frozen water!"

Lily huffed at him in exasperation. "Sev! You can pretend better than that." She tasted another snowflake. "It tastes like a strawberry ice cream float!"

Sev tilted up his face and allowed the cold snow to fall upon his tongue. "All right then. Mine tastes like . . .cherry ice."

Then he scooped up a handful of snow and tossed it at the girl's shoulder. "Tag! You're it, Lil!"

Lily shrieked in pretend fear and then chased after the slender dark haired boy, snow in her hand.

She lobbed it at him, missed, and he smirked at her. Then he scooped up another snowball and sent it flying at her. "Catch, Evans!"

It hit her right in the face and she gasped. "No fair, Snape!" Then she grabbed a double handful of snow and drew back her arm. Severus ducked the first snowball, but the other caught him on the chest and melted snow trickled inside his threadbare coat, making him shiver slightly.

Undaunted, the two continued running and catching snowflakes, tagging each other with snowballs, enjoying the crisp winter weather and each other's company. All around them the snow fell, lacy patterns dancing through the soft blue sky. Severus's eyes narrowed and for one moment he could swear he caught a glimpse of a tiny blue-skinned figure flitting on the snowflakes on soft silvery wings.

"Look, Lil! A wind sprite!"

"Where? Where? I want to see!"

But when he went to point it out to her, it had vanished.

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Blinking, he rubbed his eyes and sat up. He must have dozed off in front of the fire. Yawning, he sat up and glanced at his watch. It was ten minutes till midnight, almost Christmas. He took another look out the window and noticed the snow was falling thick and silent, the snowflakes making beautiful patterns upon the window pane.

Rising, he went to peer out through the frosted glass, and suddenly he caught a glimpse of a tiny figure, twirling and flickering like moonlight through the snowflakes. The wind sprites were out, enjoying the weather as well, he thought with a wistful smile, recalling that long ago day with Lily. She had never seen one that day, but a year later he had managed to point one out to her, explaining that only those highly sensitive in magic could ever spot one.

From then on it became a kind of game between them, tasting snowflakes and glimpsing the elusive sprites, who only showed themselves to children of magic. Eileen had told him that the sprites were guardians of small children and wherever a sprite was, no evil could come.

There are many sprites out tonight. It's too bad Lily isn't here to see them with me. Just remembering the beautiful girl with her bright emerald eyes and sweet smile, her laughter chiming like silver bells through the air, brought a sudden sheen of tears to his eyes.

Oh Lily, how I miss you! You've been dead for over a year and still my heart aches for you.

Once he had loved her, his brilliant flower, she had brought joy and sweetness into his life, and he considered it his greatest regret that he had never gotten up the courage to tell her of his true feelings. He had let fear and uncertainty overwhelm him and had lost her twice, first to James Potter, the arrogant golden boy, and lastly to death's unforgiving embrace.

He shut his eyes and felt tears slip down his cheeks, icy as the snowflakes falling on the windowsill.

He had thought he was done with grieving, done with feeling his heart tear itself in two over a woman who had never been his, who was now only a memory, her body cold and still in the frozen ground, never to run or laugh or catch snowflakes upon her tongue ever again.

He lifted a hand to wipe his eyes, cursing his maudlin musings, that had turned a pleasant evening into a nightmare of regret and sorrow.

It was then that he heard it, a soft shrill wail, ringing out through the silent night.

Severus cocked his head. Surely he had imagined it.

No one would leave a baby unattended at this hour, not on this night of all nights.

It was probably the wind. Next thing you know he'd be hearing the jingle bells of Father Christmas's sleigh and the tapping and pawing of reindeer on the roof.

Get hold of yourself, Snape! You're letting your imagination run wild, and you don't even have the excuse of being eight years old any more.

He closed his eyes and recalled the last time he had seen Lily, she had been standing on this very porch, as a matter of fact, holding her three month old son in her arms.

"This is my Harry, Sev. Isn't he beautiful?"

Severus had stared at the little face, awed at how fragile and yet perfect the baby was. "He has your eyes, Lil."

"I know. Maybe someday he'll see wind sprites too," she'd laughed.

"Maybe. If he's anything like his mother, he'll see them every time it snows."

Lily smiled at him, then he had invited her inside and made tea. She had drank it quickly, apologizing for the fact that she could only stay a few minutes, James would be home at five.

Severus had bit back a sneer at the mention of his old rival, and again the bitter taste of regret stung the back of his throat. If he'd had the guts, she could have been his wife, and this would be his son cradled in her arms.

"Severus, I need to ask you for a favor."

"What do you need, Lily?" The seriousness of her tone made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. "Whatever it is, it's yours."

"I need you to promise me that if anything should happen to me or James, you'll look after my child."

"Lily, nothing is going to happen to you," he'd soothed, touching her lightly on the arm. Baby Harry stirred, whimpering in his sleep. "Dumbledore assured me that You-Know-Who would never find you. You're protected under the Fidelius Charm, right?"

She nodded. "Yes, but . . .just in case . . .Will you give me your word, Sev? You're the only one I can trust to keep Harry safe."

He gaped at her. "Lily, I'm a spy and I doubt if James would agree to have me raise his son."

"James has agreed to abide by my decision in this. Please, Sev. You alone can keep him safe. Hide him away if you must, but watch over him. Promise me."

He looked at the face of the woman he loved, saw the anxiety and fear in her eyes and his heart twisted. These were dangerous times, and one could never be sure of anything. He darted a quick glance at the sleeping dark-haired infant, peacefully slumbering in his mother's arms.

"Very well, Lily. If it will set you at ease, I shall promise you that if anything should happen, I will take care of Harry."

"Do you swear it upon your wizard's honor, Severus?"

"Yes. I do so swear."

He clasped her hand in his and their magic bound them together, sealing the promise he had made.

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But when he had gone to Godric's Hollow to claim Lily's child, he had found the place in ruins and the boy gone, spirited away by Dumbledore to live with Lily's Muggle relatives. And afterwards he had collapsed in grief and forgotten about the promise he had made. Not until months later did he remember it, and by then Dumbledore had placed blood wards about Privet Drive and forbidden his top agent to interfere with the fate of the Boy-Who-Lived.

Again, there came the sound of a child crying.

Forlorn and lost, it hung in the air like the last refrain of a funeral dirge.

Severus shivered, and as if drawn by an invisible force, went to the door of his house and opened the door.

The moon shone down through the gently falling snow and snowflakes struck the top of the wicker bassinet that was resting on the half-cleared doorstep.

Severus gaped at the unexpected sight and the occupant of the bassinet let out another heartrending wail.

Suddenly, wind sprites popped into view, flickering and spinning about the bassinet, sending snowflakes cascading down over the Potions Master with their frantic fluttering.

"What in Merlin's name is this?" muttered the young wizard, kneeling down to peer at the baby inside. "Who would leave a baby on my doorstep?"

The baby's little face was scrunched tight and red-cheeked from the cold. It had a shock of dark hair that stuck straight up and a soft fleecy blanket was wrapped about the child. Then the baby opened its eyes and gazed right at Severus.

A pair of familiar emerald eyes met dark ones.

Severus felt his heart seize.

He knew those eyes.

They were Lily's.

The baby opened his mouth and howled again, for he was cold and hungry.

Dear sweet Merlin, Sev. It's Harry. He would know those eyes anywhere.

Severus lifted the bassinet in his arms and quickly entered the house.

Behind him, the wind sprites laughed and clapped, their wings rustling like silver bells in the still of the night.

The clock on the mantle struck midnight.

Severus carefully undid the blanket and lifted the twenty-seven month old into his arms. The child was small for his age, though the Potions Master didn't realize this. The baby felt awkward, he was not used to holding children, and he'd only held Harry once, when Lily had visited him that time. The day he'd made the promise.

Harry squirmed and whimpered. "Hush. It's all right, little one." Severus tried to make his voice as soothing as possible, all the while wondering frantically how the child had come to be here.

Could Dumbledore have changed his mind after all?

He rocked the sobbing child back and forth until Harry stopped crying and then knelt to examine the piece of parchment that had fallen onto the floor next to the fleece blanket.

Severus,

A promise made on your wizard's oath must be honored.

Merry Christmas.

There was no signature on the note, but Severus stared at the handwriting and felt a cold shiver race down his backbone.

He knew that handwriting, had seen it on dozens of assignments and Christmas cards and letters.

It was Lily's.



Severus swallowed hard and looked down at the now sleeping baby in his arms. Harry was sucking his thumb and smiling in his sleep. No doubt visions of sugar plums and chocolate frogs were dancing in his head, thought his new guardian in amusement.

"Very well, Lily. I made you a promise and I shall keep it." He kissed the sleeping Harry Potter on the forehead. "Welcome home, my son. Merry Christmas, Lily."

And from far away he could hear a woman's laughter echoing upon the breeze and a familiar voice whispered, "Merry Christmas, Sev. Love my son the way I loved you."

Severus Snape smiled through his tears.

"I will. I promise you that, Lily."

Then he settled down in the recliner with the newest member of the Snape household and watched the snowflakes.

Someday he would teach the child how to catch them on his tongue and imagine what they tasted like. Someday he would tell him of the way he and his mother had played in the snow together and learned to see the elusive blue-skinned wind sprites.

Suddenly a sprite flew up against the window, silver wings fluttering madly, and peered inside. Upon seeing the Potions Master cradling the bundle in his arms, it winked and smiled.

Then it blew a soft breath of crystalline air tinged with magic over the house and the two occupants inside. Blessed be thee, Severus Snape, and blessed be thy child. May the joys of the season fill your heart with love. Farewell.

It disappeared a moment later and Severus wondered if he'd ever seen it at all.

But then he gazed down at baby nestled against his chest and smiled. For the first time in over a year, Severus Snape was happy and

content. He had no idea what the future would bring for either of them. Yet somehow it didn't matter.

His word had been given and it would be kept. And he knew then that he was truly blessed.

This is part of a series called Snowy Encounters featuring a series of Harry & Sev stories set in the winter, and around Christmas. The next one I'll be posting is a multi-chaptered story called A Wolf in Winter. Look for it soon!